

Confronting Race and Racism in the Post-Apocalyptic American City

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Post-apocalyptic sf is uniquely suited to exploring the potential extremes of dangers already present in society. Contemporary concerns can be clearly linked to visions of the future in which environmental devastation, global war, or pandemic brings humanity close to extinction, and, as such, analyzing such texts can provide a sample of prevailing cultural attitudes and fears. The American city, a site privileged in the cultural imagination as a nexus for national issues, appears frequently as the setting for post-apocalyptic sf, its battered skyscrapers standing as monuments to the magnitude of the apocalypse, its familiar streets unsettlingly strewn with rubble and abandoned cars. Contemporary urban anxieties manifest viscerally in the ruined cities of these texts, but often strikingly absent is any overt treatment of race or racism.

As Adilifu Nama explains in *Black Space* (2008), the “structured absence of blackness” in sf generally is revealing as a fact in itself, but where race is consciously addressed it tends to “tap into the symbolic fear of racial assimilation into the American body politic” by associating “the implosion of racial boundaries with dystopian and apocalyptic visions of the future.”¹ Three texts which explore the racial dynamics of American urban spaces with their post-apocalyptic settings are W. E. B. Du Bois’s short story “The Comet” (1920), the film *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* (1959), and the film *Z for Zachariah* (2015). In each of these texts, an African-American man and a white woman are apparently the only survivors of an apocalyptic event. The two endeavor to work as equals, transcending the racial divisions of the old society. The addition of one or more white male characters introduces conflict in each text, tipping the racial balance and allowing resentment and prejudice to resurface. While these texts tell remarkably similar

stories, and each invoke New York City as emblematic of the country’s broader consciousness of race and systemic racism, their differences highlight the particular urban contexts at their times of creation.

Du Bois’s “The Comet” appears toward the end of his collection *Darkwater* (1920), and tells the story of Jim Davis, an African American man working as a messenger at a New York City bank. Ignored by his fellow New Yorkers, Jim stands almost unnoticed on the crowded streets, “outside the world.”² Jim is sent to the lower vaults of the bank just as the Earth is to pass through the tail of a comet, and he emerges to find the city suffocated by the comet’s deadly gases. Walking the silent streets, Jim finds bodies “crushed and twisted and jammed” into doorways like “refuse in a can,” as panicked New Yorkers had attempted to find shelter and “rushed and ground themselves to death.”³ Initially thinking himself the last human alive, Jim soon crosses paths with another survivor, a white woman named Julia. Julia allies herself with Jim out of necessity, but is deeply conflicted over keeping company with an African American man. A man worse than a stranger, “a man alien in blood and culture—unknown, perhaps unknowable,” Jim, to Julia, “did not look like men, as she had always pictured men; but he acted like one and she was content.”⁴ The two first look for Jim’s family in Harlem, before searching for Julia’s father at his office on the east side of Manhattan. Searching all day for survivors without success, the racial divide gradually erodes in Julia’s mind, and as they look over the dead city from the roof of the Metropolitan Tower she remarks “how foolish our human distinctions seem—now.”⁵ With the two apparently alone on the planet, Julia finds that she is now “neither high nor low, white nor black, rich nor poor,” and the man beside her “was no longer a thing apart, a creature below, . . . but her Brother Humanity incarnate.”⁶ The revelation is, however, short lived: a crowd of white people led by Julia’s father discover the pair, and reveal that the

comet’s effects were restricted to Manhattan. With the abrupt return of society Jim finds himself again “a nigger,” and is threatened with lynching for daring to be in the company of a white woman.⁷ At the story’s close Jim is reunited with a woman who may be his wife, and who is holding “the corpse of a dark baby.”⁸

Written at a time when sf was still developing into a distinct genre, “The Comet” echoes several earlier fantastical works that depict urban catastrophes. Robert Barr’s story “The Doom of London” (1894) features a suffocating fog in which panicked citizens had “fought each other like demons” to seek safety, resulting in “fearful heap[s] of dead.”⁹ Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Poison Belt* (1913) depicts a London temporarily asphyxiated when the Earth passes through a band of toxic material which poisons the ether. George Allan England’s *Darkness and Dawn* (1914) is set in New York centuries after toxic gases released from Earth’s crust have wiped out almost all of humanity. New York faced routine annihilation in the fiction of the early twentieth century, as explored by urban historian Nick Yablon, and came to be “widely represented as a landscape of sublime ruins.”¹⁰ For “The Comet,” Du Bois draws on these kinds of stories written by white authors in which either only white characters survive the apocalypse or, as is the case with *Darkness and Dawn*, in which the monstrous antagonists are unambiguous stand-ins for African Americans. This familiar setting of post-apocalyptic New York is used to dramatize ideas put forth in Du Bois’s earlier work that speak to the context of racism and segregation in New York City in 1920.

As the Great Migration saw many African Americans relocating from the rural South to the cities of the North from the 1910s onwards, “New York became the city with the largest black population in the country.”¹¹ Census data indicates that the proportion of the city’s residents who identified as black increased from less than two percent prior to 1910 to 2.7% in

1920. Manhattan had a notably higher proportion of black residents than the proportion city-wide, increasing from 2.6% in 1910 to 4.8% in 1920.¹² Alain Locke celebrated this increase of black population in northern cities in “The New Negro” (1925), writing that it represented “a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern.”¹³ The reality of deep-rooted white animosity to African Americans, however, meant de facto racial divisions in housing, and New York City came to be increasingly segregated. Accordingly, when Jim tells Julia that they must go to Harlem, her instinctive reaction shows the separation in her mind of the largely African American neighborhood from the rest of Manhattan: “‘Harlem!’ she cried. Then she understood. She tapped her foot at first impatiently.”¹⁴ When Du Bois published *Darkwater*, Harlem was on the cusp of the Modernist artistic accomplishments since known as the “Harlem Renaissance,” and offered “Negro life,” in Locke’s words, “its first chances for group expression and self-determination. It is—or promises to be—a race capital.”¹⁵ As Du Bois writes in “Of Beauty and Death,” a piece immediately preceding “The Comet” in *Darkwater*, the New York City of this era enabled an unprecedented liberation for the African American population: the “dark city of fifty thousand rises like magic from the earth.”¹⁶ Yet, the potential represented in the city is tempered by the presence of “the Veil”: a persistent gulf “between Then and Now, between Pale and Colored and Black and White—between You and Me.”¹⁷

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois describes the “Veil” of “double-consciousness” as the sense of “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.” Every African American is born with this Veil, writes Du Bois, and “ever feels his [*sic*] two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.”¹⁸ It is this Veil which is removed by the circumstances of Du Bois’s apocalypse in “The Comet.” The apocalypse serves to disrupt the categories to which Jim and Julia had

previously been ascribed, leaving their souls “naked to the night.”¹⁹ While Jim was invisible in the crowded and teeming city, the decimation of the population ironically makes him, at least to Julia, visible as a human being. With the Veil removed, albeit temporarily, the racial divisions are shown to be constructed, meaningless, and unneeded. As Reiland Rabaka writes, “The Comet” insists that “it will never be enough for the racially oppressed to repudiate racism” as “*both* the racially ruled and the racial rulers must mutually repudiate racism.”²⁰ The temporary lifting of the Veil shows the possibility for such a repudiation to take place, and *Darkwater* concludes with a hymn to the “mighty human rainbow of the world.”²¹

The post-apocalyptic New York of “The Comet” thus reflects both the potential for unity across the color line and the brutal realities of discrimination, segregation, and racist violence in American cities of the Jim Crow era. The year before the publication of *Darkwater*, America experienced widespread incidents of racist violence, in what writer and activist James Weldon Johnson termed the “Red Summer.”²² At the same time, increasing organization and mobilization in northern cities enabled by the Great Migration made the struggle for civil rights seem more attainable than it had previously. The recently established Harlem chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was to become the largest in the country, and the neighborhood was home to activists including Du Bois, Johnson, Marcus Garvey, and A. Philip Randolph. The ending of “The Comet” reflects this ambivalent combination of hope and adversity, for while Jim loses the promise of a world devoid of prejudice, and indeed loses the hope for the future represented by his child, he is nonetheless reunited with his wife. The story ends with Jim emitting a “sob of joy,” an ambivalent expression in itself.²³

The 1959 sf film *The World, The Flesh, and the Devil* presents a similarly mixed impression of the state of race relations in American cities. Ralph Burton (Harry Belafonte), the film’s African American protagonist, is a mine worker trapped underground for several days by a cave-in. Emerging to find the streets deserted and newspapers warning of an apocalyptic conflict, Ralph travels from mid-Pennsylvania to Manhattan, finding neither survivors nor even the bodies of the dead. In the city, he discovers that a global war has involved the release of tons of radioactive sodium isotopes into the atmosphere, extinguishing all life on the surface of the planet. Apparently the last human being alive, Ralph mourns the fallen world, but soon turns his attention to his own survival. He takes a modest two-bedroom apartment and sets to work equipping his sanctuary with electricity and plumbing, creating an island of light and sound in an otherwise dark and silent city. He soon meets another survivor, Sarah Crandall (Inger Stevens), a young white woman who has been anxiously watching Ralph since his arrival in Manhattan. The two soon become friends and Sarah makes attempts to progress to a more intimate relationship. When she suggests they start living together in Ralph’s apartment, Ralph repeatedly resists, pointedly remarking that “people might talk.”²⁴

With tensions escalating, a third survivor arrives, a white man named Ben Thacker (Mel Ferrer). Ben’s romantic intentions towards Sarah are immediately evident, and Ralph becomes increasingly distant and despondent, anticipating Ben’s expectation that he step aside. Jealous of Sarah’s admiration of Ralph, Ben first threatens Sarah with rape and then initiates “World War Three,” hunting Ralph through the empty streets of the city with a rifle. Initially accepting the necessity of the confrontation, Ralph stops before an inscription outside the United Nations Building reading, “They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they learn war anymore.”²⁵ He

drops his gun and walks towards Ben, who continues to fire at him. Sarah finally catches up to them, and takes first Ralph and then Ben by the hand. The film concludes with all three walking away together, hand-in-hand, as the words “The Beginning” appear on the screen.

The uneasy ending of *The World*, with its ambiguous truce between Ralph, Sarah, and the violent, sexist, and racist Ben, drew mixed reactions from contemporary critics and has since left many scholars unsure how to reconcile the message of the film as a whole. Jacqueline Foertsch writes that although the film “challenges white hysteria regarding interracial sex, . . . in many ways it is as confused and contradictory on the subject as the nation itself was in that period.”²⁶ Released three years after the removal of the “miscegenation clause” in the Motion Picture Production Code preventing the portrayal of interracial relationships and eight years before the landmark Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia* was to strike down the anti-miscegenation laws of several states, the film might have taken an opportunity to make a clear point regarding the national taboo over interracial relationships. Instead, the future of Ralph and Sarah’s unconsummated relationship is left uncertain. Thomas Cripps has claimed that for Belafonte himself the film was “one of the worst experiences in [his] life.” At first “an incredible opportunity,” its soft ending “upset” him enough that he felt “stilted and very stiff,” but too fearful of Hollywood’s “sealing” its doors to future black material if he walked away from it.²⁷

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<Illustration VIII.1: Ben, Sarah, and Ralph walk hand-in-hand-at the end of the film.>

The conciliatory tone of the conclusion is certainly jarring given the high tension between the characters throughout the rest of the film, and implies that the divisions between them will

persist, despite their truce. This suggests that the imperfect, ambivalent ending is, as with “The Comet,” reflective of the imperfect and ambivalent circumstances of the text’s historical context, and not least given the choice to set the film in post-apocalyptic Manhattan.

1954’s *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case, which deemed the “separate but equal” laws governing public schools to be unconstitutional, gave new hope to the national movement for civil rights for African Americans, which had been waning in the early 1950s. Referred to by some as the “second emancipation proclamation,” “Brown had little immediate impact on school segregation,” but “it encouraged African Americans to believe that the entire southern Jim Crow system of enforced racial segregation could be overcome.”²⁸ With high-profile campaigns such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-6, the civil rights movement was becoming increasingly visible and urgent. Politicians in New York in the late 1950s pushed for equal opportunities in housing, and from there the campaign “spread across the North and West,” with several other major cities “follow[ing] New York City’s lead, enacting a broad restriction on discrimination.”²⁹ The number of black residents in New York rose during these years, and this, coupled with a drop in the number of white residents, meant a significant increase in the proportion of black residents in the city compared to white residents.³⁰

Despite the optimism and apparent gains made during these years, discrimination and de facto segregation remained rife in the city and across the country. In 1958, Belafonte himself was “turned away from one Manhattan apartment after another,” finally being forced to rent an apartment under his (white) publicist’s name.³¹ The ironic ease with which Ralph can take a Manhattan apartment in the film, therefore, reflects the extent of the liberation afforded by the apocalypse in its destruction of all the entrenched discriminatory structures of society. Ralph’s new freedom is similarly shown as he fills his apartment with electrical goods, luxury furniture,

and works of art, symbolic of the postwar consumerist prosperity from which black America was largely excluded. Similar to “The Comet,” the apocalypse of *The World* appears to remove the racial barriers present in American society at the time of the text’s creation, but the attitudes which gave rise to such barriers are shown to be merely lying dormant. Ralph’s fears of these barriers reemerging are apparent prior to his meeting Sarah. Out of loneliness Ralph brings two white mannequins into his apartment, which he names Snodgrass and Betsy. He grows increasingly short-tempered with Snodgrass’s perpetual smile, which indicates to him that Snodgrass is indifferent to Ralph’s loneliness in the empty city. He finally throws Snodgrass from his balcony, declaring: “You don’t see me and you wouldn’t care if you did.”³² Ralph’s isolation and loneliness in what was once one of the most densely populated cities in the US closely resembles that of Jim in “The Comet.” In both cases, the lone African-American characters are considered “outside the world,” abandoned and overlooked by American society.

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<Illustration VIII.2: Ralph brings home a mannequin he names Snodgrass.>

While Sarah offers him company and clearly considers him a potential romantic partner, Ralph is too acutely aware that she would not see him as she does if the apocalypse had not occurred. After he raises this point to Sarah in an explosive scene, Sarah attempts to assure Ralph that she sees him for who he is, “a fine, decent man.” Ralph responds, “in that world that we come from you wouldn’t know that. You wouldn’t even know me. Why should the world fall down to prove I am what I am and that there’s nothing wrong with what I am?” Sarah’s implicit assumption in this scene is that Ralph should be as quick as she to forget the racial divisions of

the old world, but the inclusive gesture is her privilege as someone who is, as she puts it, “free, white, and twenty-one,” which enables her to forget so easily.³³ Ralph, on the other hand, anticipates what the return of other survivors might mean for him as an African American man. Nama points out that in 1950s America, “for black men even to look at or talk to a white woman could be fatal, a reality of life that gained national attention in 1955 with the brazen murder of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old black boy.”³⁴ This reality influences Ralph’s interactions with Sarah, and the arrival of the violent bigot Ben clearly justifies his hesitance.

“The Comet” and *The World* tell remarkably similar stories, each ending with the apparent return of the pre-apocalyptic status quo, their African American protagonists returned to minority status in a white-dominated New York City. Although it is loosely based on Robert C. O’Brien’s posthumous 1974 novel, the 2015 sf film *Z for Zachariah* is very much a retelling of these two texts, though the film is loaded with significance for the major US cities of the twenty first century.

Z for Zachariah is set in an unspecified rural location in the US nicknamed “the valley,” an oasis of green and fertile land in an otherwise ashen, toxic post-apocalyptic world. The sole resident of the valley is Ann Burden (Margot Robbie), once a member of a farming family with strict Christian values who now tends to the land alone. Two other survivors chance upon the valley and are invited to reside with Ann: an African American man named John Loomis (Chiwetel Ejiofor), who is a scientist and atheist, and to whom Ann finds herself increasingly attracted, and, later, a white man named Caleb (Chris Pine), a mineworker and Christian whose arrival upsets the balance between Ann and John. In an emotional scene highly reminiscent of Ralph’s stepping back from Sarah and Ben in *The World*, John tells a horrified Ann, “I’m not going to stand in your way is what I’m saying, okay? . . . It’s fine, it’s all good. You all be white

people together.” The conversation places a wedge between Ann and John, and Ann finds herself drawing closer to Caleb, a man with whom she shares a similar religious outlook and small-town background. As he sees Ann spend more time with Caleb, John regrets his words and becomes increasingly hostile towards Caleb. When the two men are setting up a waterwheel at the top of a waterfall, Caleb slips and is left hanging from a rope supported only by John’s grip. They hold each other’s gaze for a moment, and then the scene cuts to John returning to the farm alone, where he tells Ann that Caleb “left.” Caleb’s fate is left unstated, but the film closes with the atheist John joining Ann in the chapel, his hands clasped together in what might be read as a silent prayer for atonement.³⁵

On its surface, *Z for Zachariah* might seem a strange choice for reading the current state of race relations in major US cities. Race is only explicitly mentioned in the film with John’s instruction for Ann and Caleb to “be white people together.”³⁶ In O’Brien’s novel the character of John Loomis is not African American, and is instead described as “extremely pale.”³⁷ In addition to this, none of the action of the story of either the novel or film takes place in cities. Nevertheless, the film swiftly deviates from O’Brien’s novel to effectively become a retelling of the story of “The Comet” and *The World*. Director Craig Zobel has stated that both he and screenwriter Nissar Modi were greatly influenced by *The World* when adapting *Z for Zachariah*.³⁸ Given the film’s roots in the New York of “The Comet” and *The World* there is significance to the absence of the urban environment. The setting of the film, as with its source novel, is left ambiguous, although the novel specifies that John Loomis has walked to the valley from Ithaca in upstate New York.³⁹ In adapting the novel to the screen, Australian Margot Robbie decided on a “Southwest Virginia” accent for Ann, and several establishing shots were filmed in Welch, a tiny city in southern West Virginia.⁴⁰ Wherever one might pinpoint the

fictional valley, therefore, it cannot be said that the setting is anywhere close to the Manhattan of its predecessors, and yet there is much to read into its shift of the story of “The Comet” and *The World* to a rural setting.

The city of Welch is situated in McDowell County, a once prosperous center for coal mining and now reportedly the poorest county in the state. The county voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election, and has been used as a representative example of majority white communities across America that were left in “desperate straits” by the mechanization of industry, globalization, and the move toward renewable energy.⁴¹ Commentators have been quick to read into the demographics of the election results, which seem to indicate a stark divide between rural, white America and urban, ethnically diverse America. Trump’s rhetoric throughout the campaign exploited division between white and non-white citizens, and resulted in his being endorsed by the Ku Klux Klan and many other white supremacists. Trump’s “populist message disproportionately appealed to both white men and women living in rural America,” while major cities generally voted in favor of Democrat Hillary Clinton.⁴² Manhattan, for example, where Trump has resided for decades, gave him only ten percent of the vote.⁴³

When considered against the backdrop of division and resentment in America, *Z for Zachariah*’s use of Welch as the visual setting for a tale of post-apocalyptic survival has clear significance for the country’s attitudes toward racial diversity and urban spaces. There is even a visual signifier inviting the viewer to compare Welch and New York City in one of the opening shots of the film. As the desolate, ruined landscape is introduced, a wedge-shaped building prominently displaying the words “Flat Iron” on its awning confronts the viewer. While in reality the words refer to the Flat Iron Drug Store on Welch’s McDowell Street, this shot consciously

references a Manhattan landmark, Fifth Avenue’s famous Flatiron Building, within the very first few seconds of the film. The decision to begin the film with this shot raises the appropriateness of making a comparison between the post-apocalyptic valley and cities such as New York, which becomes more appropriate as the film goes on.

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<Illustration VIII.3: The Flat Iron drugstore in Welch, WV.>

One way in which this association manifests is in the film’s treatment of firearms. Ann and John first meet at a stream in which John is bathing, unaware that the water is highly radioactive. Ann has a rifle in her hand, having been hunting for food, and shouts for John to get out of the stream. John immediately interprets the sight of an armed white person yelling at him as a threat, and raises his hands in surrender, saying, “Okay, I’m good, I’m good,” before picking up his own gun in self-defense.⁴⁴ John fires a warning shot, and Ann drops her own gun and raises her hands, looking startled and confused by his reaction. The difference between the two characters’ perspectives is thus immediately introduced: for Ann, carrying a firearm is a normal part of life in the rural South, but for John, whose accent and career suggest a life in the urban North, guns are a sign of aggression. John’s instinctive surrender is also suggestive of the contemporary public awareness of police brutality and disproportionate use of lethal force against unarmed African-American citizens. This issue was at to the forefront of the public consciousness at the time of the film’s release due to several high-profile police killings of unarmed black citizens.

In New York City’s Staten Island in 2014 a white police officer, Daniel Pantaleo, killed Eric Garner, an unarmed African-American man, by placing him in an illegal chokehold. The killing gained worldwide attention, coming in the context of the acquittal of the vigilante killer of Trayvon Martin in 2013 and the police killings of Larry Jackson Jr. and Jonathan Ferrell in 2013 and Dontre Hamilton and Tamir Rice in 2014. The subsequent refusal by a grand jury to indict Pantaleo and the closing by Trump-appointed Attorney General William Barr of a five-year federal investigation of the case have led to large-scale protests and sharp criticism of New York’s handling of the killing. Organizations working to defend civil rights for African Americans such as the NAACP and American Civil Liberties Union disseminate advice for citizens who are stopped by police that often emphasizes remaining “calm” and “keep[ing] your hands where the police officer can see them,” so as to de-escalate the interaction.⁴⁵

John’s immediate surrender to Ann suggests that he is conscious of this kind of advice, and, tellingly, neither Ann nor Caleb respond to weapons in the same way. When Caleb arrives at the farm, for instance, John aims a rifle at him, but Caleb remains confident and simply returns John’s gaze. In raising his hands and reassuring Ann that “I’m good,” John perceives a need to placate Ann that apparently Caleb does not feel towards John.⁴⁶ A *New York Times*/CBS poll in 2015 found remarkably different impressions of the racial bias of law enforcement in the US, with around three quarters of black Americans polled seeing the police as racially biased, and only 44 percent of white Americans polled agreeing.⁴⁷ John’s response to being approached with a weapon, and particularly when contrasted with the reaction of Caleb, seems symptomatic of a societal context in which black citizens are especially cautious at the sight of an armed aggressor issuing commands.

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<Illustration VIII.4: Caleb appears to aim his rifle at John.>

John’s suspicions that his fellow survivors mean him harm are shown to be justified when John and Caleb take up rifles together to hunt turkeys. Caleb seems to aim his rifle at John during the hunt, and the film’s soundtrack encourages this impression, holding a chord for several beats to escalate tension. When Caleb fires his rifle, it becomes evident that he was aiming past John at a turkey, but the film clearly intends the moment to be ambiguous. This scene indicates that Caleb’s superficial politeness and composure, such as with his incessant addressing of John as “Sir” or “Mr. Loomis,” masks a latent violent intent toward John. Their chosen prey acts as a metaphor for the scene: the American expression “turkey shoot” means a conflict in which one side possesses an overwhelming advantage, and Caleb’s decision not to shoot John on the hunt seems to betray just such an overconfidence in the struggle between them. Caleb’s perception of his advantage seems due to the qualities he shares with Ann, such as his small-town upbringing, his religion, and, crucially, his whiteness. As Chiwetel Ejiofor says of the character he plays in *Z for Zachariah*,

[W]hen there’s two people, the ideas of religion, for example, kind of balanced out, they didn’t matter. The ideas of race, certainly, are completely irrelevant. . . . So when there’s a third person, it completely disbalances [*sic*] all of those things. The kind of societal norms start to pop back, whatever they are.⁴⁸

In all three texts, the apocalypse serves to show the constructedness of racial discrimination, and yet the impulses that necessitate the Veil do not disappear and can, in fact, easily resurface. Crucially, while in “The Comet” and *The World*, the African-American protagonists accept the return of discrimination for the purposes of an uneasy truce, and while John initially does the same thing after the arrival of Caleb, the ending of *Z for Zachariah* is comparatively uncompromising.

Ann attempts to achieve peaceful compromise between the survivors, in a manner somewhat similar to Sarah’s act of forgiveness at the end of *The World*. Ann welcomes Caleb into the house on his first night at the farm, despite John’s objections, and agrees to allow the disassembly of her father’s treasured chapel to allow John and Caleb to build the water-wheel. Ann’s trusting and compromising approach appears to pair her character with the innocence and purity of the natural space of the valley, but it is also indicative of her intellectual and ethical outlook, a hint of which we are given when John browses the farm’s library. In an early scene John scans one particular shelf, which includes classic literature and many books on farming, family, and Christianity. Particularly well-represented are books on the life of evangelist Billy Graham, with a 2007 biography by David Aikman standing out with its bold red spine. This biography is notable for its measured and even-handed portrait of Graham, and includes a chapter on Graham’s somewhat mixed record on race. As Aikman characterizes it, Graham sought to appease Southern segregationists in order to avoid becoming especially unpopular, and tended to avoid speaking directly about racial segregation in his sermons. Aikman notes two particular efforts by Graham, however, to reach out to African Americans, both of which occurred in New York City. The first of these was to invite Martin Luther King, Jr. to give the opening prayer at the New York “crusade” in 1957, and the second was to hire his organization’s

first African American associate evangelist, Howard Jones, to improve outreach in areas such as Harlem. While Aikman praises these efforts he notes that otherwise, in combating racism, Graham’s “dominant impulse had been that of evangelist and pastor, and not of prophet.”⁴⁹ Graham’s record, as outlined by Aikman, is certainly suggestive of Ann’s compromising approach and of her lack of outspokenness in response to the rising tensions between Caleb and John. As the end of the film suggests, however, the poisonous presence of racial animosity cannot be left unaddressed in the hope that it will resolve itself.

This uncompromising ending is similarly reflected in the cause of the apocalypse. In each text, the contamination of the natural environment initiates the apocalypse: in “The Comet,” extraterrestrial gases temporarily poison the air of New York, in *The World*, radioactive dust intentionally released into the atmosphere smothers the entire planet for five days, and, in *Z for Zachariah*, the complete and deadly radioactivity of the planet following global war is apparently ongoing, with the single exception of the valley. Each text utilizes an apocalypse that is invisible, insidious, and indiscriminate in its lethality, and given the focus in each on race, we might interpret the apocalypse as a metaphor for systemic racism, hatred, and division: an unseen and malevolent force that corrupts all it touches. America’s poisonous atmosphere functions differently in the three texts, however, in ways that correspond to their contexts. In “The Comet,” the catastrophe is localized and temporary, a means of dissolving the racial divide to see its constructedness and give hope for its abolition in an enlightened New York of the future. In *The World*, the planet suffers a more sustained and widespread calamity, though again it offers hope for renewal, as evidenced when Ralph brings home a branch covered in fresh blossoms. In *Z for Zachariah* the ecosystem is apparently irredeemable, with the natural world outside the valley brown and barren and the cities irradiated and deadly. The damage to the environment of *Z for*

Zachariah is so potent and so extreme that it seems to have made the planet permanently uninhabitable. *Z for Zachariah* is much less hopeful text than either of its predecessors, and this can be connected to national mood around racism in 2015.

Despite the promise of African-American movements in New York in 1920 and the growing momentum of the civil rights movement in 1959, the city and the country remained deeply segregated and unequal in 2015. In a recent profile of Barack Obama’s presidency Tanehisi Coates sums up the disconnect between the legislative progress in America and the reality of life for African Americans in the twenty-first century:

There are no clean victories for black people, nor, perhaps, for any people. The presidency of Barack Obama is no different. One can now say that an African American individual can rise to the same level as a white individual, and yet also say that the number of black individuals who actually qualify for that status will be small. One thinks of Serena Williams, whose dominance and stunning achievements can’t, in and of themselves, ensure equal access to tennis facilities for young black girls. The gate is open and yet so very far away.⁵⁰

Studies show that the distance has diminished very little since the civil rights gains of the 1960s. Reports show that African American unemployment nationwide was consistently around double that of white unemployment since at least 1960, and that “Black-white wage gaps are larger [in 2015] than they were in 1979.”⁵¹ A 2015 poll indicates that across America “blacks and whites live in separate societies. Most whites say they do not live (79 percent), work (81 percent), or come in regular contact (68 percent) with more than a few blacks.”⁵² Of course, as Henry Louis

Gates, Jr. writes, “Black America [has] never consisted of one social or economic class” and there is class division between black Americans just as there is for all Americans, but “there have been far too many lows, too many moments in which we as a country have come face to face with the deprivation, disenfranchisement, marginalization and flat-out abuse of African-Americans at the socioeconomic bottom.”⁵³ In New York City in particular, a 2015 Furman Center report found that factors including the gentrification of lower-income neighborhoods have meant that the proportion of black residents of New York City has been declining since the 1990s.⁵⁴ The de facto segregation of remaining African American neighborhoods, as Mary C. Waters writes, means that “New York City has maintained a level of discrimination high enough that it can be considered ‘hypersegregated.’”⁵⁵ The lack of progress shown by this data is astounding, and given the prevailing contemporary mood around race relations in America at the time of the film’s release, it is no surprise that the film’s depiction of a racially charged conflict ends without the kind of “soft,” hopeful ending of the earlier texts.

The toxicity of America in *Z for Zachariah* indicates a perpetual, brutal state of affairs, but the characters have notably different experiences of this: John requires a specialized radiation-proof suit, and suffers terribly when exposed to the radiation, but Caleb, on the other hand, has apparently been wandering for months without any protection, and seems strong and healthy when he arrives at the farm. The privileged white male is apparently easily able to survive the toxic atmosphere of the country, while the African American character is much more negatively affected by the conditions. Caleb can apparently go where he pleases, whether rural or urban, without suffering the consequences of a treacherous national condition. As with their reactions to being confronted with firearms, John and Caleb’s ability to traverse the hazardous

terrain of the post-apocalyptic world is symbolic of a stark distinction in the lived experiences of black and white Americans.

There are clear parallels between the stories of “The Comet,” *The World*, and *Z for Zachariah*, but when read as a sequence they seem increasingly impatient with the idea of that depictions of the future should show a reconciliation with those led by racism and hate. As Sean Brayton writes of another post-apocalyptic film set in New York, *I Am Legend* (2007), in recent years “the ‘pluralism’ of [Bill] Clinton era disaster films” has given way to the “symbolic ‘return’ of racial conflict, specifically, white supremacy.”⁵⁶ This is certainly the case with *I Am Legend*, and can also be seen in other recent post-apocalyptic sf films such as *The Colony* (2013). *Z for Zachariah* is symptomatic of this shift from racial reconciliation to the need to urgently and resolutely confront racism. While John Loomis initially accepts the presence of Caleb in the farmhouse, even insisting that Ann and Caleb go on and “be white people together” without him, John comes to reject the expectation that he must be essentially excluded from the group, leading to the climactic confrontation at the waterfall.

While the toxic post-apocalyptic city is not visited in *Z for Zachariah*, its existence is a specter that haunts life in the valley. Just as “The Comet” and *The World* expressed issues pertinent to New York City and other major US cities at the time of their release, so too is *Z for Zachariah* a reflection of the issues of its time. When viewed in their respective contexts, the fact that these three texts tell such remarkably similar stories highlights how uncomfortably similar the problems faced by African Americans are in 2015 to those perceived by Du Bois in 1920. There has been clear and visible progress over the last century, as can be seen by the fact that the first African American president left office in 2016 after two terms and with one of the highest approval ratings for any departing president.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, there has been disturbingly little

progress in terms of levels of unemployment, the wage gap, police profiling and bias, and de facto residential segregation. *Z for Zachariah*’s bleak retelling of post-apocalyptic urban survival is disquietingly emblematic of these processes, and accordingly highlights the need for these issues to be directly confronted.

Notes

¹ Nama, *Black Space*, 10; 7.

² Du Bois, “The Comet,” 253.

³ *Ibid.*, 256; 257.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 264; 263.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁹ Barr, “The Doom of London,” 76; 77.

¹⁰ Yablon, “Metropolitan Life in Ruins,” 309–10.

¹¹ Meyer, *As Long as They Don’t Move Next Door*, 32.

¹² Gibson and Jung, “Historical Census Statistics.”

¹³ Locke, “The New Negro,” 114.

¹⁴ Du Bois, “The Comet,” 261.

¹⁵ Locke, “The New Negro,” 114.

¹⁶ Du Bois, “Of Beauty and Death,” 245.

¹⁷ Ibid., 246.

¹⁸ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 3.

¹⁹ Du Bois, “The Comet,” 270.

²⁰ Rabaka, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, 78; italics in original.

²¹ Du Bois, “The Comet,” 275.

²² Johnson, “Lynching,” 53.

²³ Du Bois, “The Comet,” 273.

²⁴ *The World*.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Foertsch, “Last Man Standing,” 37.

²⁷ Cripps, *Making Movies Black*, 266.

²⁸ Flamm and Steigerwald, *Debating the 1960s*, 132; Carson, “Introduction,” x.

²⁹ Meyer, *As Long as They Don’t Move Next Door*, 161.

³⁰ Gibson and Jung, “Historical Census Statistics, 1790 to 1990.”

³¹ Swarns, “For Lena Horne, a Home at Last.”

³² *The World*.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Nama, *Black Space*, 46.

³⁵ *Z for Zachariah*.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ O’Brien, *Z for Zachariah*, 23.

³⁸ Harris and Hubbard, “Why Craig Zobel Cast Chiwetel Ejiofor.”

³⁹ O’Brien, *Z for Zachariah*, 66.

⁴⁰ Heyman, “Margot Robbie on Z for Zachariah.” The interview in which Robbie discusses the accent was transcribed from a telephone conversation, so Robbie may in fact have been referring to the south of West Virginia.

⁴¹ Koppel, “The View of Voters.”

⁴² Morin, “Behind Trump’s Win.”

⁴³ “2016 New York Presidential Election Results.”

⁴⁴ *Z for Zachariah*.

⁴⁵ “The 411 on the Five-O.”

⁴⁶ *Z for Zachariah*.

⁴⁷ Sack and Thee-Brenan, “Dim View of Race Relations.”

⁴⁸ Qtd. in Whitney, “Chiwetel Ejiofor’s ‘Z for Zachariah’.”

⁴⁹ Aikman, *Billy Graham*, 145.

⁵⁰ Coates, “My President was Black.”

⁵¹ Austin, “50 Years of High Unemployment”; Wilson and Rodgers, “Black-White Wage Gaps Expand.”

⁵² Sack and Thee-Brenan, “Dim View of Race Relations.”

⁵³ Gates, “Black America and the Class Divide.”

⁵⁴ “State of New York City’s Housing and Neighborhoods – 2015 Report.”

⁵⁵ Waters, “Nativism, Racism, and Immigration in New York City,” 147.

⁵⁶ Brayton, “The Racial Politics of Disaster,” 75.

⁵⁷ Clement and Guskin, “President Obama is Leaving Office.”

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